

Introduction

PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I travel through the rural Midwest proudly wearing a black T-shirt proclaiming in hot-pink letters: This is What a Feminist Looks Like. The manager of the Cracker Barrel in Missouri said to my husband: “She doesn’t look any different than my wife.”

My family heritage is intimately tied up with Lutheran congregations in South Dakota, and I was in the first generation of our family who earned a college degree. When I was about to head across the country to graduate school, the pastor of my home church remarked about my interest in feminist theology: “But you’re not one of those feminazis, right?”

During a much more recent summer, a friend of mine introduced me as a feminist theologian to her father-in-law, a pastor in a mainline Protestant denomination for the past forty years, and he later asked her, “So, what *are* the basic tenets of feminist theology?”

In the same weekend, I attended and presented a paper at the National Women’s Studies Association, where I found, other than in my own sparsely attended session, virtually no papers on Christianity or any other specific religion, with only various relatively vague discussions about some amorphous spirituality.

Later that summer, I was a speaker at a national gathering of theologians in a mainline Protestant denomination. During the question-and-answer session, I found myself reminding the audience that the problem leading to women's oppression around the globe is still patriarchy.

Some theologians, and perhaps some denominations, reflect a comment made by Catherine Keller in a recent article: that feminism "may have become overfamiliar before it ever got familiar."¹ Because of the advances women have made in society and even in some churches in recent generations, the work of feminism is sometimes seen as over and done: mission accomplished.

This array of episodes suggested to me that a lot of serious Christians and serious feminists do not actually know much about each other in the twenty-first century. Maybe they don't care about each other. Maybe they think they don't need to pay attention to each other any more. They clearly are not really talking or listening to each other. The rich and varied field of feminist theology that has emerged in the past forty years has demonstrated that they are compatible: Rosemary Radford Ruether, Delores S. Williams, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Phyllis Trible, Jacquelyn Grant, and Elizabeth Johnson among many others show how women working from a decidedly feminist perspective engage deeply with the resources of the Christian tradition to both deconstruct and reconstruct its theology. Mary Daly, Carol Christ, and others show how feminist critique of the Christian tradition often leads women away from it.

1. Keller, "The Apophasis of Gender," 906.

At the same time, many Protestant denominations have faithfully responded to feminism and the women's movement by changing their practices of ordination and appointment to the ministry to include women, by using inclusive language for God throughout the life of the church, by expanding liturgical resources to be more inclusive in prayer and hymnody, by opening worship and congregational leadership to lay women and men, and by issuing social statements on topics like abortion, contraception, and sexuality that allow women and families to exercise their own moral discernment. Feminism and Christianity can learn and have learned a lot from and with each other.

This book asks and answers some fundamental questions that Christians and feminists have about each other in a new century and a new generation. The questions reflect suspicions encountered in a meeting of the two, and the answers reflect the twenty-first-century realities that now inform both. It is time for a renewed conversation between feminism and Christianity if anyone inside or outside the two groups thinks that either is no longer relevant. Feminism has transformed the lives of women and men irrevocably, and Christianity remains a powerful and ever-changing tradition with enormous influence around the world. Before explaining these things more closely by getting to the questions and answers, some history and basic terminology needs to be explained.

TERMINOLOGY AND HISTORY

A problem with this conversation is that both feminism and Christianity are not monolithic entities. Both have been “essentialized” in the sense that many assume that *Christian*

means only one essential thing, and that *feminist* means only one essential thing. Many think that all feminists are alike, and that all Christians are alike. Neither has ever been true. Feminism and its goals have been defined differently by different individuals and groups at different points throughout history, and different types of feminism continue to exist. Christianity has been a diverse and complicated religious and social entity from its earliest community of believers, and different types of Christianity still flourish in the twenty-first century. Both feminism and Christianity are traditions in the original sense of the Latin root word, *trado*, literally a “handing over” of something. Traditions grow and shift and change as they are handed over throughout time and across generations while retaining insight from the past. Both feminism and Christianity are traditions that continue to change, making this renewed conversation necessary and possible.

Feminism

Feminism criticizes sexism and patriarchy, and advocates for the equal humanity of women. This basic definition is assumed throughout this book. Feminism entails both a critical and a constructive component: patriarchy is criticized, and women’s equal humanity is constructed. Core beliefs of feminism include the idea of human equality, alongside an activist impulse to do something to establish social and political justice for women where it has not fully existed. Students of history generally discuss feminism using the metaphor of waves: first-wave, second-wave, and third-wave feminism are largely generational movements distinguished on the basis of historical situation, goals, and strategies, among other things. A brief review of this history reveals how feminism has shifted

over time and leads to a discussion of the different types of feminism that exist today.

History of Feminism

The first wave of feminism encompasses the work of women and men in the nineteenth century to gain for women the right to vote. It dovetailed with abolitionism since many of the early suffragists were also working to end slavery in the United States. The nineteenth century produced women like Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, who advocated for women's rights at home and in their government, who spoke out against the institution of slavery, who criticized the Christian church, and who produced classic texts such as *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1838) and *The Woman's Bible* (1898).

The first wave of feminism was led almost entirely by white, upper-class women. The 2004 movie *Iron-Jawed Angels* tells the story of some of these women and includes two dramatized moments that reveal historical truths about race and class. In one scene, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an African American woman activist who worked to end lynching around the U.S., demands that the black women march with the white women in their demonstration for the vote on Woodrow Wilson's inauguration day, not in a separate section. In another scene, Alice Paul, founder of the National Woman's Party and author of the original Equal Rights Amendment, attempts to recruit women factory workers for the cause of suffrage. Labor activist Ruza Wenclawska directly challenges Paul about the relevance of the vote for the lives of women working seven days a week under excruciating conditions in the factory.

Moments like this reveal some of the criticism of first-wave feminism that has since emerged: In their focus on the vote, these early feminist activists were nearly blind to the realities of life for women of color and working-class women. This women's movement was populated by women who were racially segregated and socially privileged. Their focus was narrowly on achieving the right to vote, which they believed would improve life for all women equally. The first wave of feminism culminated in the ultimate ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote in 1920.

The second wave of feminism surfaced beginning in the middle of the twentieth century. With the Food and Drug Administration approval of oral contraception in 1960 and the proliferation of social and civil rights movements throughout the 1960s, feminism emerged in this generation focused on issues like women's reproductive health, an equal-rights amendment to the Constitution, access to educational resources (secured with Title IX in 1972), and social problems like sexual harassment and workplace discrimination. The 1970s produced women theologians such as Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, who advocated for women's rights, spoke out against the Vietnam War, and produced theological texts like *Beyond God the Father* (1973) and *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983).

Like the first wave of feminism, the second wave too was dominated by white women, and by educated upper- and middle-class women. This did not go unnoticed and did not last unchallenged for long. Writer and activist Audre Lorde was among the first to publically call white feminists to task for their continued erasure of poor women and women of color

from the women's movement. In 1981 at a national women's studies conference, she pointed out that "white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone."² She also challenged feminists directly saying, "it is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians."³ Lorde thus opened the way for real criticism of feminism and its attempts to speak of "women's experience" without attending to the many differences of experience that women have on the basis of race, class, sexuality, age, ability, and other factors.

What many now call the third wave of feminism is generally populated by those of us who learned about feminism with the critiques of Audre Lorde and were raised on the benefits of first- and second-wave feminist activism. For me, there have always been girls' sports and boys' sports in school. Women and men my age were raised with *Free to Be You and Me*, with racial integration on *Sesame Street*, with legal and safe birth control, with basic access to the higher-education institutions of our choosing, and with the presence of women pastors and priests throughout much of the Christian tradition. Third-wave feminists focus on a myriad of social problems like safeguarding marriage equality, ending race- and gender-based violence, ameliorating the effects of global capitalism on the poorest of poor women, and ensuring that the gains made for women's equality in previous generations are not lost in shifting political and ideological

2. Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 117.

3. Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 110.

winds. Third-wave feminists also continue to advocate for benefits that still elude women (such as equal pay for equal work), and work to uncover sexist ideologies that are often more subversive than ever before.

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their 2000 book *Manifesta* point out that feminists in the third wave have inherited a “core belief in the legal, political, and social equality” from the first wave, along with “strategies to fight sexual harassment, domestic abuse, the wage gap” and other issues from the second wave. Beyond that, modern problems have been added to the mix: “equal access to the Internet and technology, HIV/AIDS awareness, child sexual abuse, self-mutilation, globalization, eating disorders, body image, sexual health, and access to adoption and legal marriage.”⁴ One arena in which third-wave feminism has not had a sustained focus is religion, though some voices are beginning to emerge. Joy Ann McDougall discusses “Feminist Theology for a New Generation” in her 2005 article in *The Christian Century*, and describes the features of a new feminist theology. It includes the “mainstreaming of feminist discourse” to address broader social issues like globalization, work and family patterns, as well as the central doctrines of the Christian church.⁵ Third-wave feminist theology is still taking shape today.

Types of Feminism

In addition to this ebb and flow of issues throughout the generations, various types of feminism have emerged with different theoretical frameworks and different terms to focus their

4. Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 21.

5. McDougall, “Feminist Theology for a New Generation,” 20-25.

analyses of sex and gender. Feminist theories that emerged most strongly during the second wave locate the explanation for sexism and its solution in different places. *Marxist feminists* adopt the theories of production and critiques of capitalism, that Karl Marx developed in the nineteenth century, to understand the source of women's oppression by locating it within a system of economic and class stratification. *Socialist feminists* attempt to merge this class analysis with a more focused gender analysis to explain sexism.

Liberal feminists argue primarily that since a major source of women's oppression is unequal treatment under the law, changing the law and transforming the current social system is the most effective way to eradicate women's oppression. *Radical feminists* see gender oppression as the initial and fundamental form of oppression. *Cultural feminists* examine the differences between men and women and revalidate that which patriarchy has devalued: all things associated with the female and the feminine. *Gynocentric feminists* argue that the differences between men and women are so significant that women's separatism is the most desired outcome. A less radical form of this is *difference feminism*, which is more neutral about the need to separate men and women and seeks to provide explanations and context for understanding the differences that do exist.

Throughout this book I am articulating what could be called a third-wave liberal feminist view of the relationship between feminism and Christianity. This means that I have come to feminism within the second wave, benefitting and learning from it while turning my attention to the complex issues of the twenty-first century that demand our simultaneous engagement with race and gender and class and sexuality

and many other factors. It also means that I am generally committed to working within existing systems and institutions in order to make them better for women and men. These include politics, education, and religion.

At the same time, I take seriously much of the radical-feminist critique which would advocate abandoning patriarchal religion altogether. I am informed by the Marxist-feminist critique that social class is a fundamental source of oppression, and I see that the cultural-feminist move to prize women's humanity as unique and distinct from men's humanity has been a source for women's empowerment in various communities throughout history. My choice to articulate a feminism of one sort does not diminish the insight and power of feminisms of other sorts.

Christianity

Christianity is a religion whose adherents believe that God is uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus, who is the Christ, the Messiah and Savior for the world. Core beliefs of Christianity, in addition to the belief about Jesus as the Christ, include the belief that human beings are uniquely created in the image of God; that they are redeemed in a sinful and fallen world by a loving and compassionate God who wants abundant and peaceable life for all; and that they are sustained by the Spirit of the God, who relates to them throughout their lives. Christians believe that this triune God's grace is unearned, and that their faith is most active in love. Christianity has always been a diverse religion—from the early divisions between Pauline Christians and gnostic Christians through the Great Schism and the Reformation to the modern proliferation of

Protestant denominations, new Christian movements, and independent megachurches.

The history of the religion, as well as its current variations, shows how despite the fact of core beliefs, many different Christianities exist today.

History of Christianity

Following the life and death of Jesus, whose followers proclaimed him to be the resurrected Christ, the earliest Christian communities in the first century were divided about many issues. Some of these issues included the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, from which it emerged; and how one was to gain knowledge of the God proclaimed by Jesus and his followers. Jewish Christians believed that the Jesus movement was fundamentally about reform within their long-standing tradition, while Pauline Christians believed that justification was a product of God's grace, available to all who had faith and not just to Jews. Other movements like gnostic Christianity understood the teachings of Jesus in conjunction with other philosophical ideas like *gnosis*, or special knowledge. Pauline Christianity won the struggle to define Christianity in these early generations, appealing as it did to a broad range of people: Jews and Gentiles alike, along with women, the poor and the marginalized. The early phase of Christianity as a fledgling movement came to an end with the Edict of Milan, issued by Constantine in 313. The Edict ended persecution of Christians and made a way for the eventual elevation of the movement to the preferred and official religion of the Roman Empire.

From the fourth century through the fifteenth century, Christianity became a powerful world religion with fully artic-

ulated creeds, doctrines, and dogmas to which adherents were required to express allegiance. An institution that centralized church authority—the papacy—was established, and an early conflict ended in the Great Schism of 1054 when the Eastern churches and Western churches split over issues of leadership (the pope in Rome or the patriarch in Constantinople?), language (Latin or Greek?), and the biblical canon (which books are in, and which books are out). The mutual excommunication of the leaders in the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic churches revealed that Christianity had become a religion with growing complications.

By the time the fifteenth century arrived, Roman Christianity had come to dominate western Europe, and criticisms of its central institutions and practices were emerging on a number of fronts. John Wycliffe and others had initiated movements to translate the Bible into local languages, rather than to maintain only the scholars' and priests' Latin; and the church's increasing reliance on indulgences as a matter of promise to the faithful and a financial resource for the institution began to draw criticism. It was against a shifting social and political landscape that Martin Luther emerged in Germany. He was an Augustinian monk deeply concerned about the state of his own soul as well as the soul of the church. When he posted his Ninety-five Theses at Wittenberg in 1517, he was well on his way to recovering the biblical themes from Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians—that everyone is justified by grace through faith in Christ. The impact of this reclaimed biblical theme was a sweeping Reformation. This Reformation altered how people experienced worship, how they understood the grace of God, and how they read their Bibles. The Catholic Counter-Reformation rejected the Protestant movement fully

at the Council of Trent in 1545, reaffirming the Latin Vulgate as official church Scripture, rearticulating a theology of seven sacraments after as many as five had been irrevocably stripped of that status by the Reformers, and closing the door on other Protestant criticisms of the institution and its practices.

As Christianity took shape after the Reformation, denominations began to proliferate when there were disagreements about issues like infant baptism, the permissibility of war, and the proper relationship between church and state. Through the Enlightenment and into the modern era, philosophers and sociologists both welcomed and dismissed the globally dominant Christianity. Such Christianity on one hand resisted and on the other hand responded to new developments in science and the study of history—developments that fundamentally challenged basic tenets of Christian belief such as who wrote the Bible, and when and how the world came into existence.

Two final distinguishing events have brought Christianity into the form it is largely in today. The establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948 represented an intentional move toward a global Christian community in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust. This organization continues to engage its member Christian churches in the global community, a task that becomes even more pressing over time. The Second Vatican Council represented a similar move to bring the Roman Catholic Church into conversation with issues of the twentieth century. Called by Pope John XXIII in 1962, the series of council meetings over three years discussed issues raised by the modern world: what it meant to be human in the twentieth century, what it meant to be church in a world that could no longer function as if

Christianity were the only truth, how to assess the church's culpability after two world wars and the Holocaust, and what would happen with the growing collapse of colonialism in lands where the church had evangelized. Vatican II produced a number of groundbreaking documents and statements that articulated the place of the Church in this world, that shaped worship life for a new generation of Catholics, and that left a number of questions (such as the possible place of women in Church leadership) answered in a way that was unsatisfying for legions of the faithful.

Types of Christianity

With this history, Christianity remains today a complicated religion with many different expressions, some of which dispute the legitimacy of others. Several ways of categorizing types of Christianity exist and have varying levels of specificity. The broadest and most basic typology that emerges from the brief history sketched above names Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant as the major forms of Christianity today.

The Roman Catholic Church is the organization that claims that its leader, the pope, is the apostolic successor of St. Peter, appointed by Jesus to be the head of his church on earth. The Orthodox traditions are those that originated largely from the East-West split and the Great Schism of the eleventh century. Many subgroups fall under the category of Orthodox today—from Russian Orthodox to Assyrian Orthodox to Greek Orthodox. Protestant traditions are perhaps the most numerous, originating with the sixteenth-century Reformation and leading to hundreds or even thousands of denominations today.

What the Catholic-Orthodox-Protestant taxonomy does not completely account for in present-day Christianity is the emergence of groups like restorationist churches and independent Bible churches, many of which claim to be returning to the foundations of the religion or restoring a lost history of Christianity altogether. In fact, the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century in the United States laid the groundwork for communities like Joseph Smith's Latter-day Saints and Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Scientists to undercut existing religious institutions and traditions with renewed spiritual fervor and with followers who adhere to these teachings still. Throughout the twentieth century, evangelicalism in America began to reshape not only the religious but also the political landscape in ways that continue to affect culture and law in the twenty-first century.

Throughout this book, I speak from the position of one reared and educated in a mainline Protestant denomination in the United States: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This affects my understanding of what it means to be Christian, and what Christianity looks like. My advanced degrees are from Protestant schools, both Lutheran and Methodist, and my nine years of teaching have been at a university and a college related to Protestant denominations: Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ. Therefore this book reflects the view of a scholar and person shaped by a certain intellectual and family traditions. At the same time, my views are informed by the rigorous scholarship of Catholic women and men, challenged by conservative evangelical Christian students, and accountable to the questions of those agnostic and atheist friends whom religious communities ignore or dismiss too easily.

FEMINISM AND CHRISTIANITY

All this makes the notion of a book about basic questions between *feminism* and *Christianity* essentially complicated. If neither word means just one thing, then how can a dialogue between the two spheres be focused enough to have any meaning?

By embracing the diversity that is feminism and the variations that are Christianity, this book originates from my own feminist and Christian location and reaches in a number of directions to bring many people into a renewed conversation for the twenty-first century. For Christians who think that the goals of feminism have been achieved and that feminists should stop complaining, this book will serve as a reality check about the situation for women today and as a push to think more deeply about the inequality and injustices very real in churches and communities around the world. For feminists who think that Christianity is not worth their attention because it remains an oppressive institution after so many generations of feminist activism, this book will serve as a reality check about the need for continued criticism as well as about the liberating and life-giving dimensions of a religion that has sustained women and their survival across time and cultures.

Feminism and Christianity both exist as powerful cultural and political forces in the twenty-first century. A deeper understanding of each in relation to the other suggests that there are ongoing conflicts as well as unexplored areas of common interest and cause. For some, this is an old and obvious point. To them, I ask why suspicions remain and why the work of creating a just society and more equitable church eludes us. For others, this is a problematic claim—that the

two could work together. To them, I encourage further reading and reflection as to whether their conclusion is based in reality or in stereotype.

A READERS' GUIDE

The questions and answers that follow attempt to cover a range of topics fundamental to a discussion between feminism and Christianity. By no means do these exhaust all the questions and answers that exist between the two. In fact, I encourage readers to come up with additional questions for their own consideration and conversation. I attempt to be comprehensive while clearly not exhausting the details on any one point. To this end, because the essays in this book are relatively concise, I have provided a short list of suggested readings associated with each topic at the end of each essay. These are texts and authors that inform my claims as well as provide much additional material for discussion. I encourage anyone or any group reading this book to pursue topics of special interest to them by seeking out more authors and texts, starting with the ones I mention. In addition, I have provided a glossary of key terms and concepts at the end of the book, which I encourage all readers to consult. With the glossary I have included a summary list of the questions and answers for easy reference.

The book is structured so that an individual, group, or class could dip in and out of it as interest and time permit. The first half of the book looks at feminist questions to Christianity. It is written to address the questions from feminists suspicious of Christianity. It could be of special interest to feminist activists and women's studies students.

The second half of the book looks at Christian questions to feminism and is written to address questions from Christians suspicious of feminism. It could be of special interest to individual Christians and their congregational reading and study groups. In both cases, the questions will hopefully provoke more questions and further discussion in response to the answers I have composed. However readers approach this book, I beg each one to keep reading and to keep talking to those of whom they are suspicious or with whom they are unfamiliar. I am a teacher by vocation and intend this book to be provocative as well as educational.

SUGGESTED READING

Sally Bruyneel and Alan G. Padgett. *Introducing Christianity*. 2003.

Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. 2003.